PIJSSL

Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature

A Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary e-Journal with SJIR 2025 = 6.034 & ISSN: 2581-6675

Vol. 09, No. 06 (June 2026) **DOI:** 10.51879/PIJSSL/090602

Email: editor.pijssl@gmail.com | **Website:** www.pijssl.com

OPEN ACCESS

Deleuze, Guattari, and *The Melancholy of Resistance*: War Machines and Lines of Flight in Krasznahorkai's Provincial Cosmos

Dr. Bandana Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tezpur College, Assam.

Email: missbandanasharma@gmail.com

Abstract

This article offers a Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of László Krasznahorkai's The Melancholy of Resistance, interpreting the novel's decaying provincial world as a dynamic field of assemblages, deterritorializations, and reterritorializations. The provincial town embodies a stratified state apparatus in entropy, while the arriving circus, with its colossal stuffed whale and enigmatic Prince functions as a nomadic war machine that introduces smooth space, affective intensities, and molecular flows into the coded social order. The ensuing riot is analyzed as a pack multiplicity that erupts from molecular paranoias into molar violence, only to be recaptured by Mrs. Eszter's authoritarian stance. Central characters serve as figures of resistance and becoming: Valuska's cosmic dances and innocence constitute lines of flight and an attempt to construct a Body without Organs (BwO), while Mr. Eszter's musical retuning project seeks a sonic plane of consistency beyond conventional tonality. The novel's distinctive long, serpentine sentences are read as a stylistic war machine that mirrors the thematic chaos and produces immersive, deterritorializing effects on the reader. Drawing on concepts from Anti-Oedipus, A Thousand Plateaus, and Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, the article positions Krasznahorkai's melancholy not as nihilistic resignation but as the immanent affective tone of living amid perpetual becoming, capture, and escape.

Keywords: *Deleuze, Guattari, Kafka, War Machines, Lines of Flight, BwO, resistance*

Introduction

In László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*, a decaying Hungarian provincial town confronts an enigmatic intrusion: a circus bearing a colossal stuffed whale and a shadowy figure known as the Prince. This arrival precipitates a descent into mob violence followed by the imposition of a new authoritarian order under Mrs. Eszter. The novel's long, serpentine sentences and oppressive atmosphere render a world of entropy, where fragile structures of meaning—social, musical, cosmological—dissolve and reform. Reading this text through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptual apparatus illuminates its dynamics as a play of assemblages, deterritorializations, and reterritorializations. The town functions as a stratified state apparatus, the circus as a nomadic war machine, the mob as a molecular multiplicity erupting into molar violence, and characters like Valuska and Mr. Eszter as embodying lines of flight or attempts to construct bodies without organs amid cosmic and social chaos. Krasznahorkai's melancholy emerges not as mere pessimism but as the affective tone of resistance within immanent forces that perpetually undermine stable identities and orders.

Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize society through the lens of desiring-production and machinic assemblages. In *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, the state apparatus represents a molar organization that striates space, imposes hierarchical segmentarity, and captures flows of desire into coded territories. The

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provincial town in Krasznahorkai's novel exemplifies such an apparatus in decline. Its residents cling to routines and bourgeois respectability, as evident in Mrs. Plauf's paranoid anxieties, yet an underlying entropy gnaws at the edges. Her "not knowing whether she would arrive home at all" (p. 73) is a reminder of the uncertainty that looms large as well as of the desire-production that precipitates from her relationship with her sisters, despite the odds of her not being able to get home. The novel foreshadows the eerie arrival of the circus as "she kept a suspicious eye on the terrifying gallery of undefined faces reflected in the window, her feelings swung between anxiety and yearning" (p.97, TMR), negotiating against her fears in the disorienting journey and yet bound by a 'yearning' for home, or invariably for a sense of order.

The following excerpt reveals the chaotic backdrop wherein desire-producing agents such as Mrs. Plauf are embedded and release their potential for lines of flight:

> "…all normal expectations went by the board and one's daily habits were disrupted by a sense of ever-spreading all-consuming chaos which rendered the future unpredictable, the past unrecallable and ordinary life so haphazard that people simply assumed that whatever could be imagined might come to pass, that if there were only one door in a building it would no longer open, that wheat would grow head downwards into the earth not out of it, and that, since one could only note the symptoms of disintegration, the reasons for it remaining unfathomable and inconceivable, there was nothing anyone could do except to get a tenacious grip on anything that was still tangible…" (p.65, TMR)

The town's decay signals a weakening of striations: unreliable trains, spreading chaos, and a pervasive sense that 'ordinary life' has become 'haphazard.' This resonates with Deleuze & Guattari's view that every assemblage contains lines of flight; the state is never total but always haunted by potentials for decoding. The arrival of the circus introduces an exterior force that accelerates these lines, disrupting the sedentary order.

War Machines and Lines of Flight in *the Melancholy of Resistance*

Central to *A Thousand Plateaus* is the distinction between the state apparatus and the war machine. The latter is exterior to the state, invented by nomads, operating through smooth space rather than striated, and defined by speed, affect, and becoming rather than capture and organization. The circus in *The Melancholy of Resistance* operates precisely as such a war machine. It is not a conventional military entity but a nomadic assemblage: transient, heterogeneous, carrying the Leviathan-like whale as an inscrutable object that defies signification. The whale, evoking Hobbes yet rendered as a silent, material monument to indifference, functions as a pure intensity or anomalous body. It draws crowds not through representation but through its sheer, excessive presence, catalyzing rumor and unease. The Prince, a grotesque, homunculus-like demagogue who incites without direct command, embodies the war machine's non-hierarchical, affective mode. He does not issue orders in a state-like fashion but unleashes packs and multiplicities. The circus thus deterritorializes the town's coded space, transforming streets and squares into zones of smooth, unpredictable movement.

This deterritorialization culminates in the riot, where the townspeople form a pack or crowd multiplicity. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between molar and molecular lines: molar aggregates solidify into rigid structures (the state, the subject), while molecular flows introduce supple segmentarities and cracks. The mob in the novel begins molecularly. They diffuse fears, whispers, and individual paranoias before crystallizing into collective violence. Yet it lacks a clear telos; the rioters pursue no coherent political programme but act out of a vague 'disgust and despair,' delighting in terror without fixed objects. This aligns with the philosophers' analysis of packs or crowds as affective multiplicities that can evade or confront state capture. The violence is not purely destructive in a negative sense but productive of new intensities, even as it invites reterritorialization. Mrs. Eszter's subsequent 'movement for moral rearmament' seizes the chaos, reimposing order through a harsher apparatus. She exemplifies the state's capacity to appropriate the war machine's energies, channelling molecular flows into a new molar segmentarity—authoritarian control disguised as renewal. The cycle of disorder and (re)order illustrates Deleuze & Guattari's insight that states and war machines are not fixed entities but poles in a perpetual process of capture and escape.

Valuska, the novel's gentle, simple-minded protagonist, offers a poignant figure of resistance and becoming. Described as a village idiot who delivers mail and performs cosmic dances mimicking planetary movements in bars, Valuska inhabits a minor mode. In Deleuze & Guattari's terms, becoming-minor or becoming-animal involves shedding majoritarian identities such as those of the 'man of reason,' the bourgeois subject for alliances with imperceptible forces. Valuska's cosmology and dances deterritorialize anthropocentric perspectives; he aligns with celestial multiplicities, entering a zone of proximity with the nonhuman. His innocence is not naivety but a line of flight from the town's paranoid segmentarities. While others succumb to fear or power, Valuska's affective openness suggests a schizoanalytic potential: a body without organs (BwO) that refuses full organization into the social machine. The BwO, for Deleuze and Guattari, is not a literal organless body but a plane of consistency where flows circulate without rigid stratification. Valuska's cosmic performances attempt to construct such a plane, connecting human movement to universal refrains. Yet the novel's melancholy underscores the vulnerability of these lines; the mob and new order crush or marginalize such becomings. Valuska's arc reveals the tragic dimension of resistance: lines of flight may end in capture or disappearance, reinforcing absolute-negative deterritorialization, yet their existence affirms immanence over transcendence. This idea reverberates with the following instance in the book, "Mrs Plauf was almost crushed by the knowledge that while she was only a few steps from freedom, suddenly there, behind her back, at any moment, some wholly incomprehensible something might leap out and attack her."(p. 337)

Again, Mr. Eszter's musical project deepens this philosophical layer. Obsessed with retuning instruments to 'natural' harmonies, rejecting the well-tempered scale of Bach, he seeks a sonic BwO. Deleuze and Guattari frequently invoke music as exemplary of becoming and the refrain. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the refrain territorializes chaos into habitable milieus but can also open to the cosmos. Eszter's endeavour deterritorializes conventional Western tonality, which he sees as an imposed strata masking discord. By pursuing pure intervals, he aims for a music that aligns with the world's indifferent power rather than human illusions of order. This resonates with Deleuze & Guattari's plane of immanence, where music becomes a body of sounds, intensities, and vibrations unbound by organism or signification. His eventual return to equal temperament marks a reterritorialization: to appreciate Bach anew, thereby signalling the limits of such experiments. The novel suggests that pure deterritorialization is unsustainable; one must navigate the oscillation between chaos and form. Eszter's retreat into contemplation after the violence positions him as an intellectual nomad, observing rather than fully participating in the state's recapture. His philosophy echoes the book's Hobbesian undercurrents filtered through Deleuze & Guattari: the world as indifferent flows where order is arbitrary yet necessary, beauty a fragile assemblage amid entropy.

The whale itself merits consideration as a cosmic or anomalous element. As a dead, stuffed Leviathan, it defies easy symbolism yet functions as a catalyst for multiplicities. In Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective, the anomalous is the borderline figure that enables pack formation—the exceptional individual or object around which becomings swarm, like an assemblage that purports deterritorialization. The whale draws the town into proximity with the nonhuman, the material, the silent. It evokes Moby-Dick's unknowability but grounds it in grotesque materiality, a memento mori that exposes the indifference of the universe. This indifference parallels the plane of immanence: a glacial reality of flows and intensities indifferent to human meaning. The circus's exhibition thus stages a confrontation between stratified human territories and smooth, cosmic space. Rumours proliferate rhizomatically, without central origin, undermining arborescent structures of authority. The Prince, associated with this assemblage, operates as a sorcerer or demagogue who rides molecular lines rather than commanding from above. His nihilism is not mere negation but an affirmation of chaos as the natural condition, forcing residents to confront the decoded flows beneath their ordered lives.

The epigraph to the first part of the novel reads: "It passes but it does not pass away" poetically condenses Deleuze and Guattari's rejection of linear, entropic time in favour of a dynamic, virtual ontology where passage is real but never total loss. What "passes" actualizes momentarily; what "does not pass away"

is its virtual, eventual power to return differently—fuelling becomings, lines of flight, and new earths/people. In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari posit:

> "And then, all around, there are agents of production and antiproduction, the organizers of the escape, the accomplices, the allied sovereigns, the revolutionary enemies, the jealous and hostile uncles, who are not persons but so many states of rising and falling through which the pretender *passes.* (Emphasis added)." (p.88, AO)

In Krasznahorkai's world of rumor, crowd forces, and enigmatic upheaval, characters and the town itself act as such a 'pretender'—passing through chaotic states such as hope, terror, resistance, and melancholy that do not simply dissipate but linger as virtual forces, fuelling further *becomings*. The epigraph thus poetically frames the novel in Deleuzo-Guattarian terms: the forces pass through the present but do not pass away, keeping the virtual revolutionary (or catastrophic) potential alive. The passage is registered in the sense of becoming—movement, traversal, and actualization in the present. Desire flows, connects, and shifts; intensities rise and fall in the conjunctive and disjunctive syntheses of desiring-machines. "But it does not pass away" captures the virtual persistence. These states, alliances, enmities, and escapes are not discrete historical events that vanish once traversed. They form part of an incorporeal event or a block of becoming that subsists on the plane of immanence. The pretender's passage does not exhaust or resolve the network; the forces (production/antiproduction, escape, revolution, hostility) remain available for new connections, new actualizations, new becomings, as U.R.Bowie notes,

> "Eszter resolves to live from that moment on only in the company of Valuska, this angelic, "wholly ethereal" presence, "wholly transformed into spirit and pure flight." In an ironic juxtaposition of detail, it is precisely at the moment when Eszter comes to this realization that Valuska the angel is in the process of being divested of his angelic nature… His march with the marauders in the night leaves him "utterly blinded in the first shocking and decisive moment of his complete rebirth." (The Dactyl Review)

Stylistically, Krasznahorkai's prose style itself constitutes a literary war machine. The dense, paragraph-long sentences without conventional breaks create a smooth textual space where thoughts and affects flow continuously, resisting striation into digestible units. This mirrors the novel's themes: reading becomes an immersive, hypnotic process akin to entering the town's unfolding chaos. This stylistic excess produces a sense of alienation: the reader, like the characters, navigates dense thickets of thought and affect without easy orientation. Like the long takes in Béla Tarr's adaptation *Werckmeister Harmonies*, the second part of the book, the style deterritorializes conventional narrative, producing intensities rather than plot-driven molar forms. Deleuze & Guattari praise minor literature (Kafka) for its collective, political enunciation that destabilizes major languages. They talk of experimentation with language even as they assert "be a foreigner in one's own tongue" (p.134, ATP). Krasznahorkai's Hungarian, rendered in English through George Szirtes' translation achieves a similar effect: a baroque yet oppressive idiom that makes the familiar provincial setting strange, opening it to philosophical and political becomings. The text thus resists interpretation as simple allegory, whether of late communism or universal totalitarianism, and insisting instead on immanent multiplicity.

Comparing Krasznahorkai's whale to Kafka's 'monstrous vermin' in *The Metamorphosis* (1915), we may observe that both intrusions embody the absurd: meaningless yet world-altering. Kafka's insect defies biological or symbolic resolution; interpretations range from psychoanalytic (Oedipal guilt) to socio-economic (alienation under capitalism). Similarly, Krasznahorkai's whale resists easy allegory, evoking Hobbesian Leviathan, biblical Jonah, or cosmic indifference; yet propels the town toward anarchy and authoritarian recapture. In both cases, the grotesque element is not resolved but absorbed or expelled, highlighting the human tendency to restore 'normality' at the cost of empathy or insight. An analogy may be further drawn with Harold Pinter's absurdist comedy of menace "The Birthday Party", wherein the fragility

of a seemingly harmless world and the terrifying intrusion of oppressive threats to one's autonomy are dealt with. Mrs. Plauf's paranoia mirrors this absurdity: "For some time she kept her eyes fixed on the door, ready to leap up, though she no longer knew of whom she was most frightened, nor from what direction the danger was most likely to threaten…" (p. 237, ibid)

Applying Deleuzo-Guattarian theory further reveals the novel's political ontology. The transition from circus-induced anarchy to Mrs. Eszter's regime illustrates how states appropriate war machines. The mob's violence, initially a line of flight from boredom and decay, becomes captured as justification for new segmentarities. Mrs. Eszter's opportunism, exploiting chaos for power exemplifies the state's axiomatic: it decodes to recode on its own terms. Yet resistance persists molecularly. Valuska's enduring (if crushed) idealism, Eszter's contemplative withdrawal, and the novel's own melancholic tone gesture toward affirmative potentials within destruction. Melancholy here is not depressive resignation but the affective register of living amid perpetual becoming and unbecoming. Deleuze & Guattari's schizoanalysis encourages experimenting with desiring-machines rather than mourning lost unities. Krasznahorkai's characters, trapped in cycles, nonetheless expose the virtual: other assemblages, other tunings, other dances are possible, even if unrealized.

The book's cosmic dimension further enriches this reading. Valuska's planetary performances and Eszter's musical cosmology evoke Deleuze & Guattari's refrains that connect milieus to the universe. The universe is not a harmonious whole but a chaotic multiplicity of forces. Chaos is not opposed to order but its immanent condition; 'crystals of order' emerge temporarily within it. The novel's pessimism, viz. seeing order as illusion, resistance as melancholy, aligns with an ethics of immanence. It affirms the flows, constructs provisional BwOs, and traces lines of flight even knowing that capture looms. In this light, *The Melancholy of Resistance* is not merely diagnostic of totalitarianism or entropy but a call to perceptual and affective renewal. It urges readers to become sensitive to molecular cracks in molar orders, to the nonhuman intensities embodied in the whale, the cosmos, or mob affects that unsettles anthropocentrism.

Conclusion

Conclusively, the philosophical lens of Deleuze and Guattari provides tools to navigate Krasznahorkai's dense world without reducing it to thesis. The novel assembles philosophy, politics, and aesthetics into a singular machine that produces *affects* of unease and wonder. Its resistance lies in refusing easy consolations, neither revolutionary optimism nor nihilistic surrender, but in mapping the forces at play. In an era of resurgent populisms, circulating fears, and ecological indifference, the text's relevance endures. The circus may always arrive; the question is how assemblages respond— through rigid reterritorialization or creative, if melancholic, flights. Krasznahorkai, like Deleuze and Guattari, invites us to think in the middle of things, on the plane where bodies, sounds, crowds, and whales connect and disconnect in endless variation. He exposes what lies beneath the ordinary: the persistent human condition wherein sudden disruptions render our constructed worlds as fragile, our identities as provisional, and our resistance as inevitably melancholic.

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